

Suicide and the soul

More than fifty years ago, James Hillman wrote a book entitled, *Suicide and the Soul*. The book was intended for therapists and he knew it wouldn't receive an easy reception there or elsewhere. There were reasons. He frankly admitted that some of the things he proposed in the book would "go against all common sense, all medical practice, and rationality itself." But, as the title makes clear, he was speaking about suicide and in trying to understand suicide, isn't that exactly the case? Doesn't it go against all common sense, all medical practice, and rationality itself? And that's his point.

In some cases, suicide can be the result of a biochemical imbalance or some genetic predisposition that militates against life. That's unfortunate and tragic, but it's understandable enough. That kind of sickness goes against common sense, medical practice, and rationality. Suicide can also result from a catastrophic emotional breakdown or from a trauma so powerful that it cannot be integrated and simply breaks apart a person's psyche so that death, as sleep, as an escape, becomes an overwhelming temptation. Here too, even though common sense, medical practice, and rationality are befuddled, we have some grasp of why this suicide happened.

But there are suicides that are not the result of a biochemical imbalance, a genetic predisposition, a catastrophic emotional distress, or an overpowering trauma. How are these to be explained?

Hillman, whose writing through more than fifty years have been a public plea for the human soul, makes this claim: *The soul can make claims that go against the body and against our physical wellbeing, and suicide is often that, the soul making its own claims.* What a stunning insight! Our souls and our bodies do not always want the same things and are sometimes so

much at odds with each other that death can be the result.

In the tension between soul and body, the body's needs and impulses are more easily seen, understood, and attended to. The body normally gets what it wants or at least clearly knows what it wants and why it is frustrated. The soul? Well, its needs are so complex that they are hard to see and understand, not alone attended to. As Pascal so famously put it: "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." That is virtually synonymous with what Hillman is saying. Our rational understanding often stands bewildered before some inchoate need inside us.

That inchoate need is our soul speaking, but it is not easy to pick up exactly what it is asking of us. Mostly we feel our soul's voice as a dis-ease, a restlessness, a distress we cannot exactly sort out, and as an internal pressure that sometimes asks of us something directly in conflict with what the rest of us wants. We are, in huge part, a mystery to ourselves.

Sometimes the claims of the soul that go against our physical wellbeing are not so dramatic as to demand suicide but in them, we can still clearly see what Hillman is asserting. We see this, for example, in the phenomenon where a person in severe emotional distress begins to cut herself on her arms or on other parts of her body. The cuts are not intended to end life; they are intended only to cause pain and blood. Why?

The person cutting herself mostly cannot explain rationally why she is doing this (or, at least, she cannot explain how this pain and this blood-letting will in any way lessen or fix her emotional distress). All she knows is that she is hurting at a place she cannot get at and by hurting herself at a place she can get at, she can deal with a pain that she cannot get to. Hillman's principle is on display here: The soul can, and does, make claims that can go against our physical well-being. It has its reasons.

For Hillman, this is the “root metaphor” for how a therapist should approach the understanding of suicide. It can also be a valuable metaphor for all us who are not therapists but who have to struggle to digest the death of a loved one who dies by suicide.

Moreover this is also a metaphor that can be helpful in understanding each other and understanding ourselves. The soul sometimes makes claims that go directly against our health and well-being. In my pastoral work and sometimes simply being with a friend who is hurting, I sometimes find myself standing helplessly before someone who is hell-bent on some behavior that goes against his or her own well-being and which makes no rational sense whatsoever. Rational argument and common sense are useless. He’s simply going to do this to his own destruction. Why? The soul has its reasons. All of us, perhaps in less dramatic ways, experience this in our own lives. Sometimes we do things that hurt our physical health and well-being and go against all common sense and rationality. Our souls too have their reasons.

And suicide too has its reasons.

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